

SYMPOSIUM | A NATION IN SERVICE

Securing the American Character

BY GEN. STANLEY MCCHRYSTAL FROM SUMMER 2014, NO. 33 - 13 MIN READ

Democracy grants rights and requires responsibilities. This reciprocal notion of citizenship is as old as the concept of self-government. In his most recent State of the Union address, President Barack Obama affirmed these sentiments:

That's the spirit that has always moved this nation forward. It's the spirit of citizenship—the recognition that through hard work and responsibility, we can pursue our individual dreams, but still come together as one American family to make sure the next generation can pursue its dreams as well....Citizenship demands a sense of common cause; participation in the hard work of self-government; an obligation to serve our communities.

His predecessor from the other side of the political aisle, President George W. Bush, had spoken similarly:

What you do is as important as anything government does. I ask you to seek a common good beyond your comfort; to defend needed reforms against easy attacks; to serve your nation, beginning with your neighbor. I ask you to be citizens. Citizens, not spectators;



ourselves, but because we hold beliefs beyond ourselves. When this spirit of citizenship

is missing, no government program can replace it. When this spirit is present, no wrong can stand against it.

It's not a new theme. Long before either President had spoken, Pericles put it more bluntly to the people of Athens: "Our public men have, besides politics, their private affairs to attend to, and our ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters; for, unlike any other nation, regarding him who takes no part in these duties not as unambitious but as useless."

Civic participation grants a sense of ownership to citizens.

Service confers a measure of empathy, patience, and a willingness to sacrifice in those who are fortunate. It can empower those who are less so. Active citizenship, when tied to a common endeavor, instills pride in a nation—it's why we point to those who fought together in World War II as the Greatest Generation, not only for what they did from 1941 to 1945, but for how much they accomplished for the country in the following decades.

Today, the need for such a common experience of citizenship is more poignant than ever. We are drifting apart. Contrary to the illusion of constant connectivity, Americans are isolated—geographically, ethnically, economically, religiously, and culturally. An affluent student from Greenwich, Connecticut will never meet a student from Harlem.

Traditional forms of civic participation have atrophied. Many Americans' sole connection to the country is through paying taxes and voting—not nearly enough to bind people to their communities. Our politics lurches from one bitter breakdown to the next, consumed with petty partisan controversies. Meanwhile, massive issues that affect our national prosperity and security languish unaddressed. Lastly, we are losing our concept of citizenship. The sense of responsibility and contribution that John F. Kennedy trumpeted, and the willingness to sacrifice for an idea that Abraham Lincoln immortalized in 272 words at Gettysburg, feel like faint echoes from earlier, nobler times.



institutions of all kinds have the capacity to host them, and the technology exists to connect young people, institutions, and funders.

All young Americans, then, should have the opportunity—and feel the responsibility—to serve their country. What we need is to create a culture of service in America, one in which a year of service is culturally expected, if not quite mandatory by law. And we need a realistic pathway and mechanism for young Americans to be able to serve.

What would the concept of a service year entail? A young person would perform a year of full-time service between the ages of 18 and 28 and receive a modest stipend. In a manner similar to participation in existing programs such as the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps, he or she would complete the “service year” at a host institution: a nonprofit, university, or other institution, doing work in an array of fields from education to conservation, and performing tasks like building homes, serving meals to the elderly, and helping veterans transition back to civilian life.

This would not be a big new government program. Rather, service years would be funded through public-private partnerships enabled by a national-service technology platform that would connect young people who want to serve, organizations that can host them, and funders. [See Shirley Sagawa, “From Idea to Reality: A National-Service Platform,” page 28.] There wouldn’t be a single top-down program. Rather, everyone would be connected by the common experience of their service year.

To be sure, some Americans will continue to devote periods of their professional lives to public service, whether in the military, State Department, or intelligence community. Some Americans will choose careers as police, firefighters, EMTs, teachers, or some other civic profession. These institutions should not be expanded simply for the sake of letting everyone serve—this is not federal make-work. The service year is intended for Americans who would otherwise live their entire adult lives as private citizens.

Such proposals are not new. In his 1910 essay “The Moral Equivalent of War,” William James called for a program of peacetime civic conscription. “Such a conscription, with the state of public opinion that would have required it, and the many moral fruits it would bear, would preserve in the midst of a pacific civilization the manly virtues,” he



William F. Buckley made a similar call in his 1990 book, *Gratituae*, writing, “Materialistic democracy beckons every man to make himself a king; republican citizenship incites

every man to be a knight. National service, like gravity, is something we could accustom ourselves to, and grow to love.”

America is now at a crossroads.

We are failing our children—the very Americans for whom we are most responsible. Every year, 25 percent of young Americans don’t graduate from high school, making them essentially unemployable in a modern economy. Many of those who *do* graduate are not, in any real sense, “educated.”

Nearly seven million 16- to 24-year-olds are out of school and out of work, costing our nation billions of dollars every year in increased social services and lost productivity. More than two-thirds of fourth-graders in the United States do not read proficiently. A recent study of an AmeriCorps service year program, called Minnesota Reading Corps, found that “[t]he average kindergartener with an AmeriCorps tutor performed twice as well as students without one,” and that “students with higher risk factors (such as dual-language learners and students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch) who received AmeriCorps tutoring significantly outperformed students who did not.”

But a service year would go beyond solving social problems. Universities will find that service-year alumni are better students. Of the 20 million Americans enrolled in college, a strong majority do not graduate on time: A Harvard study published in 2011 found that just 56 percent of students at four-year colleges graduated within six years. A service year could provide an opportunity for a young person to mature and prepare for college. Such an experience would be more meaningful than a traditional “gap year” of taking a year off to travel.

Furthermore, our understanding of what predicts success in a career has shifted over time, from cognitive measures such as IQ and conscientiousness to noncognitive measures such as creativity, grit, and persistence. Creating a cultural expectation that every young person does a year of challenging, meaningful national service—whose goals are big and where success means solving complex, dynamic problems—would



employers are seeking. As research by academic psychologist Angela Duckworth and

others has shown, “the achievement of difficult goals entails not only talent but also the sustained and focused application of talent over time.”

In the 1970s, surveys of Fortune 500 companies demonstrated that employers were looking for skills defined by reading, writing, and arithmetic. But surveys of employers within the last year showed that the top skills they sought were the ability to work in a team; to make decisions and solve problems; to plan, organize, and prioritize work; and to communicate verbally with people inside and outside an organization—all skills that service years would foster.

In addition, depending on the nature of the service program, young people can also develop specific hard skills associated with their area of service. For example, with YouthBuild and the Green City Force Corps, members learn construction skills. With City Year and Teach For America, members learn skills needed to work in education. FEMA Corps members learn disaster relief skills.

More important than the skills a service year would impart on those serving is national service’s ability to mend an increasingly shorn society. We are becoming a country of people who do not know how to relate to one another. The percentage of American families living in middle-income neighborhoods went from 65 percent in 1970 to 42 percent in 2009. The percentage of families living in wealthy neighborhoods went from 7 percent to 15 percent during the same period, and the percentage living in poor neighborhoods went from 8 percent to 18 percent. In other words, between 1970 and 2009, the middle class shrank dramatically, while the percentage of families living on the extremes more than doubled, from 15 percent to 33 percent. People of different income levels interact with one another less and less.

Even as we interact less often across social divides, civic institutions such as church and marriage have begun to dissolve. While marriage and religion may not be appropriate for everyone, these conventions are important in that they bind people’s futures to one another and to communities. Given the above, it’s no surprise that young people have lower levels of social trust than preceding generations. According to a recent Pew



in dealing with people,’ just 19% of Millennials say most people can be trusted, compared with 31% of Gen Xers, 37% of Silents and 40% of Boomers.”

While our most recent presidents have called for active citizenship, I fear we've devolved into a condition that's heavy on rights and light on responsibilities; as a nation we've allowed our civic muscles to atrophy. Service has become someone else's job—an interruption on an otherwise straight path.

But there is much to be hopeful about. Despite dwindling social trust, young people are in fact more likely than their predecessors to try to serve in some way. In a 2010 Pew survey, 57 percent of millennials reported having volunteered in the last six months. Thirty percent of millennials identified doing meaningful work as the single most important factor in a successful career, while 71 percent identified meaningful work as one of the top three most important factors.

Unfortunately, the demand for service exceeds the supply of service opportunities. AmeriCorps had more than 580,000 applications for just over 80,000 slots in 2011. In the same year, Teach For America had some 48,000 applications for just 5,200 slots. There's no longer a common pathway large enough to accommodate such enthusiasm. According to Pew, "relatively few Millennials—just 2% of males—are military veterans. At a comparable stage of their life cycle, 6% of Gen Xer men, 13% of Baby Boomer men and 24% of Silent men were veterans."

It would be easy to look at these numbers and say that young people simply don't want to join the military, but that's not the case. The military is smaller than it was, and relatively fewer young people are considered fit for military duty. Rather than expanding the military simply to provide more service slots, the country should work to create a new civic institution—the service year—that's reflective of young people's enthusiasm even as it functions to give everyone a stake in the outcome of the country.

To endure in the long run, national service and the service year must be something that young people *want to do*. Conscription movements fail, and become counterproductive, when they become something that wealthier young people can avoid.



organizations, and businesses. According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics, there are more than 1.4 million tax-exempt organizations in the United States.

In 2012, the nonprofit share of GDP was 5.5 percent. In 1995, nonprofits reported \$1.39 trillion in total assets; by December 2013, that number had risen to \$4.76 trillion, far outpacing inflation.

While a new system of national service would be expensive (we estimate it would cost \$22.3 billion for one million service-year positions), the return on investment is over three-to-one. When there were attempts to institute such a system of national service in the past, the nonprofit industry was not at the scale it is currently. In fact, only a fraction of nonprofit organizations would need to host young people doing a service year, and \$22.3 billion represents a fraction of the money that exists in the nonprofit sector today.

At the outset of his aforementioned essay, William James poses a rhetorical question: Would the veterans of the Civil War vote to have it “expunged from history”? The answer he gives to his own question is a resounding “No.” For, according to James, “those ancestors, those efforts, those memories and legends, are the most ideal part of what we now own together, a sacred spiritual possession worth more than all the blood poured out.” (James then quickly points out that no one would start a war simply to achieve “a similar possession.”)

The key to the survival of national service is this: Even as it helps fix many social ills, and makes more mature young men and women, the underlying purpose of national service must be to mold better citizens and bind our young people to one another and the nation. National service must have some intrinsic value; it must achieve the “sacred spiritual possession” without blood being poured out. The only way we can turn these ideas that are over a century in the making into a reality is if we get a broad swath of the American people to say, “Everyone should serve for a year.”

The lack of a cohesive narrative—one that connects someone in a conservation corps in California to someone in the Minnesota Reading Corps, and these people to a movement that says national service should be an essential piece of American culture—has allowed the movement to fail piecemeal. Because there’s never been a unifying narrative tied to the national character, these efforts have often been viewed as “small ideas” and have in



Other challenges certainly remain: It will be difficult to ensure adequate training and supervision. We need to work hard to guarantee that this is a common expectation and

opportunity for *everyone*, regardless of background. And we will need to pay for it. But our nation is burning to lead again on a big idea. National service is the right idea, and if we commit to it, I'm confident that any of these challenges can be overcome.

Young people want to serve, our country badly needs it, and the infrastructure exists such as it never has before. There's a chance—right now—to create a new rite of passage into adulthood, and forge a renewed sense of citizenship.

FROM THE SYMPOSIUM

A Nation in Service

For a country that prides itself on its ability to make a difference, we do surprisingly little to encourage domestic aid through national service.

NEXT

Can National Service Become Integral to Our Culture?

BY HARRIS WOFFORD

14 MIN READ

[SEE ALL](#) 

GEN. STANLEY MCCHRYSTAL is a retired four-star general and the former commander of the U.S. and International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and of the Joint Special Operations Command. He is the co-founder of McChrystal Group, LLC, and a senior fellow at Yale University's Jackson Institute for Global Affairs. He is also the Chair of the Leadership Council for the Aspen Institute's Franklin Project, dedicated to promoting national service initiatives among American youth.



[VIEW COMMENTS](#)

